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ABSTRACT

This study investigates effects of perceived rule-breaking on the moral reasoning cf young children. Thirty first-grade children (15 males and 15 females) were read 10 randomly ordered moral judgment stories by one of three experimenters. Each story was accompanied by a two-frame cartoon-like drawing depicting the action. Twc stories of each of the following five types were included: negative intention/negative consequence (NN); negative intention/negative consequence with rule-breaking (NNrb); negative intention/positive consequence (NP); negative intention/positive consequence with rule-breaking (NPrb); and positive intention/negative consequence (PN). Following pre-training with the scale the children rated the story characters on an eight-point scale ranging frcm very bad to very good. Repeated measures analysis of variance revealed a significant story effect which, however, was not directly in accord with Piagetian theory. Individual comparisons via Tukey tests showed the NPrb stories were rated significantly different from every other story type. No other story comparison was significant. Further analysis cf the findings suggests (1) that intention may be more salient to a child if the story portrays intended damage to anchher person rather than to property; and (2) a need for revision of Piaget's theory cf moral reasoning that takes into account story content and perhaps incorporates the Piagetian notion cf decalage. (Author/RH)

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Story Content as a Factor in Children's Moral Judgments

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Running head: Moral Judgments

Story Content as a Factor in
Children's Moral Judgments

There is some evidence to suggest that the transition from consequence-to intention-based moral judgments in Piaget's (1932) theory is not unidimensional but rather a function of a number of variables including story content. That is, in children we can see a large variation in behaviors related to moral reasoning; and thus it appears a bit simplistic to expect all children under the age of 8 in all situations to judge on consequence. Recent research has found that young children, under certain circumstances, do attend to the intention of the actor and make judgments based on intention (Chandler, Greenspan & Barenboim, 1973; Elkind and Dabek, 1977; Imamoglu, 1975; Moran & McCullers, 1978; Suls & Kalle, 1979). The finding that young children can and do make judgments on intention may suggest that some form of a horizontal decalage is operating in the development of moral reasoning. Horizontal decalage refers to the child's ability at a given chronological age to perform with varying degrees of success on tasks involving the same basic mental operations but presented in different contexts. A further delineation of the contexts in which young children do attend to intention, however, is needed. This study investigated the effects of rule-breaking on the moral reasoning of young children. Previous unpublished research by this author suggested that this may be a critical variable in children's judgments.

Method

Thirty first-grade children (15 males and 15 females) were read

10 moral judgment stories by one of three experimenters. Each story was accompanied by a two-frame cartoon-like drawing depicting the action. Two stories of each of the following types were included: negative intention/negative consequence (NN); negative intention/negative consequence with rulebreaking (NNrb); negative intention/positive consequence (NP): negative intention/positive consequence with rulebreaking (NPrb); and positive intention/negative consequence (PN). The children rated the story characters on a 8-point scale ranging from very bad to very good. Children were familiarized with the scale prior to presentation of the moral judgment stories. The order of the stories was randomized.

Results and Discussion

A repeated measures analysis of variance revealed a significant story effect, F (4,116) = 39.17, $p < .001$. This effect however, was not directly in accord with Piagetian theory. Individual comparisions via Tukey tests showed the negative intention/positive consequence stories with rulebreaking (NPrb) were rated significantly different from every other story type: NP, q (29) = 9.23, $p < .01$; NN, q (29) = 11.00, $p < .01$; NNrb, q (29) = 10.41, $p < .01$; and PN, q (29) = 9.33, $p < .01$. No other story comparison was significant (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The negative intent/positive consequence ratings, then, did not differ from the stories with negative consequences as would be predicted

predicted from Piagetian theory. On the negative intent/positive consequence stories with rulebreaking, these children judged the story actor on consequence but on the other negative intent/positive consequence stories the actor appeared to be judged on intention. This was cause for concern because this specific story content effect was not in the predicted direction. Further examination of the stories, however, provided some clues as to why this occurred. Both these stories appeared to involve an interaction with a peer. Thus, if the actor's bad intention is directed at a peer (e.g. trying to get someone in trouble), and the outcome is good, (e.g. incidental praise given by a teacher), the actor is still seen in a negative light. This would suggest that children develop intentionality in situations with property damage. This finding is supportive of other research conducted by Moran & McCullers (1978) and Elkind and Dabek (1977).

It could be suggested that this is an example of horizontal decalage and may parallel the child's development of person permanence prior to object permanence in infancy (Bell, 1970). Bell found that in infancy the acquisition of person permanence precedes acquistion of object permanence. Due to the saliency of peer interactions (especially in the first years of school) it might be that intention-based judgments are formed initially in situations involving peers rather than in situations involving only property damage.

The findings do suggest a need for revision of Piaget's theory of moral reasoning to take into account story content and perhaps to

incorporate the Piagetian notion of decalage. Although rulebreaking did not prove to be a significant factor, the findings do suggest that intention may be more salient to a child if the story involved intended damage to another person rather than to property. It is my belief that centration coupled with the concept of horizontal decalage should be used to explain the transition from consequence- to intention-based moral judgments. Additional research especially in early childhood is needed to provide a coherent framework for the isolated findings of intention-based judgments in young children. These "exceptions to rule" may provide the necessary impetus for revision of Piagetian theory to better account for the development of moral reasoning prior to the age of eight.

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Table 1

Mean Character Ratings on Stories as a Function of Story Content

Story Content	Ratings				
Intention	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative	Positive
Consequence	Negative	Negative	Positive	Positive	Negative
Rulebreaking	With	Without	With	Without	Without
	2.42	2.25	5.77	2.82	2.78